ROAD

DEEP PURPLE: afraid to take risks

Purple: in deep trouble?

PURPLE'S BRIEF was transparent from the outset. Play fast and very loud and you'll conquer the universe. No dice, amigos, not this small segment of the great Orb in any case. My foot tapped spasmodically, of course, but then it's liable to do that when I'm in a room with a loud clock, riding on a train, or watching a T.V. documentary on wood-peckers.

The fact that my first reaction was "What a bunch of posers", didn't help matters, I'm sure. Actually there are only two blatant poseurs in the band: vocalist D. Coverdale, an all-purpose blue denim Robert Plant surrogate who has the balled fist/strut 'n' sneer H.M. vocalist stereotype down to a tea, and lead guitarist Tommy Bolin (a sweet faced sorta Elvis in his pre-flab G.I. period) lip curler, with an over cramped axe to grind and a raised fist/arched backsilhouette ready to accompany every sustained chord.

Fortunately, Coverdale, was to spend a fair amount of the set off-stage, thus allowing room for bassist Glen Hughes to his own far more expressive tonsils instead.

Bolin was not so lucky, this tour is something of a test-flight for him, so he had to spend a lot of time in the limelight. He also, along with Lord and drummer Ian Paice had to go through the agonizing ritual, the solo.

It was a piecemeal affair: 'floaty' bits, an unwielding hunk of blues, plus a great circuit of blitzkrieg chording. But the time wasn't frenetic enough for the Purple die-hards, one or two of whom had the audacity to cry out things like "Come back Blackmore", as Bolin doodle-bugged his way to overdrive.

But he was in good company. Lord's own solo spot, the long instrumental lead-in to 'Maisie', was strictly cinema organ stuff all the way, a touch of Bach, a hint of sabre dance, spot of greensleeves and a dollup of Jimmy Smith all clumsily tethered. The crowd loved it.

To give Ian Paice his due he didn't thump his heads overlong. A small mercy that, considering how colourlessly mechanical the thumping that occurred turned out to be. The applause he received, uncertain, more an acknowledgement of the athletic prowess required to sustain such, metronomic heavy handedness than for said performance's imaginative content.

To me, the most, perhaps the only enjoyable moment of the set was Glen Hughes' spirited rendition of Ray Charles' 'Georgia', with Lord leaving the stops in this time and consequently displaying a little feeling, and even Bolin's blue torch flicks proving genuinely atmospheric.

Hughes also acquitted himself commendably on 'This Time Around', a mellow soul ballad (for Stevie Wonder) which allowed him to do a fair Shirley Bassey impression over more sympathetic Lord's keyboards. He blew it, of course, by bringing the whole band in for a total dinosaur of a coda.

United, Purple's individual blemishes disappear among the cogs of a relentless juggernaut; the dry ice rolled in as Coverdale hollered his way through a string of "Get downbaby's".

Dessert was 'Speaking' (introduced by some tasty rolls from Paice). Immediately, followed by a "let's spend the night together", of equal hard-nosed uniformity.

All a bit dull really, despite all the fracas. Still, I can't help the sneaking suspicion that inside the polygon an acronism that is Deep Purple there's a bunch of intelligent musicians trying to get out. Trouble is, they seem afraid to take risks, assuming instead that their audience will respond only to the lowest common denominator in hard and tried clichés and when even that is down as sloppily as it was on Saturday, it all adds up to a great deal of presumption. Dangerous ground indeed. — GIOVANNI DADOMO